

Many Colleges Fall Short on Registering Student Voters

A third have not complied with new requirements, a Chronicle survey finds

BY ELIZABETH F. FARRELL
AND ERIC HOOVER

A MAJORITY of colleges and universities are not in strict compliance with a federal law that requires them to make a "good-faith effort" to provide students with voter-registration materials, according to a national survey by *The Chronicle* and the Institute of Politics at Harvard University. The data also indicated, however, that almost two-thirds of colleges were making some effort to comply with the law.

A 1998 amendment to the Higher Education Act, which governs most

Students battle local restrictions in efforts to increase voting.
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federal student-aid programs, requires colleges to obtain voter-registration forms 120 days before the local registration deadline

and distribute them to students enrolled in all degree or certificate programs. Colleges that fail to comply with the provision could jeopardize their federal student-aid funds.

Of the 249 institutions that responded to the survey, 48 percent said they had procedures for requesting voter-registration forms from state or local election officials, while 33 percent said they did not have such procedures. Nineteen percent said they were "not sure" if they did.

Among the institutions that said they had procedures for obtaining voter materials, only 42—or 16.8 percent of the responding colleges—had requested the forms at least 120 days before their respective deadlines.

As the November election nears, politically active students throughout the nation are urging colleges to comply with the law in an effort to increase voter turnout on campuses.

Yet officials at some institutions

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One-Third of Colleges Fail to Meet Letter

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said that they were unaware of the provision—or that they had ignored it. Others, who said they had attempted to meet the law's requirements, contended that state election boards had failed to provide them with a sufficient number of voter-registration forms in a timely fashion.

In an analysis of the survey, David King, director of research at the Harvard institute, distinguished between colleges that had complied with the letter of the law and those that had complied with the spirit.

To measure if colleges were making some attempt at complying even if they did not conform exactly to the law's requirements, Mr. King, an associate professor of public policy at Harvard, looked at whether institutions had made paper voter-registration forms available anywhere on their campuses and whether voter-registration drives had taken place on campuses during the previous semester.

At such colleges, he noted, those drives could have been sponsored by noncampus organizations, and college officials could have made voter-registration forms available on campuses without actively distributing them to students.

Mr. King found that 65 percent of the colleges surveyed had complied with the spirit of the law (a figure including colleges that complied fully). More than a third of the colleges, 35 percent, did not comply with either the letter or the spirit of the law.

"Most colleges and universities are trying to do the right thing," Mr. King said. "Two-thirds have at least some minimum programs and are living up to the spirit of the law."

"The other way to look at it is that a third of the schools aren't doing very much at all. They're clearly failing their students, the communities in which they live, and failing the next generation of political voters."

Compliance was higher at public institutions. The survey found that nearly 75 percent of them complied with the letter or spirit of the law, while 56 percent of private colleges did so.

The survey was sent via e-mail to officials of 815 colleges and universities, 249 of which responded between August 6 and August 25.

The representative sample of academe included a diverse range of institutions. Among the respondents, 54 percent were public institutions, 43 percent were private.

Colleges were asked to list, among other things, the locations of polling places for students. Twenty-eight percent had a polling place on campus. Fifty-three percent said a polling place was within a few blocks of the

campus, while 44 percent said there was one more than a few blocks away.

Officials were also asked to grade their institution's effectiveness at registering voters. A majority—62 percent—gave themselves an A or a B, while 37 percent gave themselves a C or lower.

Some college officials, Mr. King observed, "clearly think it is not their job to be involved in voter education, not even registration."

A 'GOOD-FAITH EFFORT'

Stephen W. Hensley, dean of student affairs at Marshall University, which responded to the survey, said in an interview that he had given his institution's efforts to register voters a D. The university did not have a procedure for acquiring and distributing voter-registration forms, he said.

Mr. Hensley said he was not familiar with the voter-registration provision in the Higher Education Act.

Although Marshall welcomes political groups and speakers, to encourage student interest in politics, Mr. Hensley argued that the university did not have a responsibility to promote voting. "If students are interested in the process," he said, "they're going to find a way to get registered."

On some other campuses the challenge for students is a lack of assistance from the government. Some state election officials, including those in Wisconsin, have told colleges that government agencies do not have the money to provide campuses with voter-registration forms for every student. (The voter-registration law provides an exemption to colleges that request but do not receive enough forms within 60 days of the registration deadline.)

To fill the void, grass-roots groups like the New Voters Project are helping to get colleges the voting materials they need. The project has registered 100,000 18- to 24-year-olds in Wisconsin since the spring. One hitch: Some town clerks have complained to the group that they lack the resources to process the flood of forms.

The 1998 law was meant to encourage colleges to make a campuswide commitment to registering voters.

But at some institutions, election experts say, officials mistakenly interpret a "good-faith effort" to mean putting a pile of voter-registration forms in the library.

Ivan Frishberg, communications director for the New Voters Project, recently received an e-mail message from one local election official that read, "These people you have working out there are causing ma-

of Federal Voter-Registration Law

for headaches. ... Remember our budgets have been cut. Stop this madness."

Mr. Frishberg likens colleges' approach to the law to drivers' attitude to the speed limit: "It's still astounding how many people are ignorant of the law or actively choosing not to follow it."

Some administrators say colleges are less inclined to encourage political participation than they were in the past.

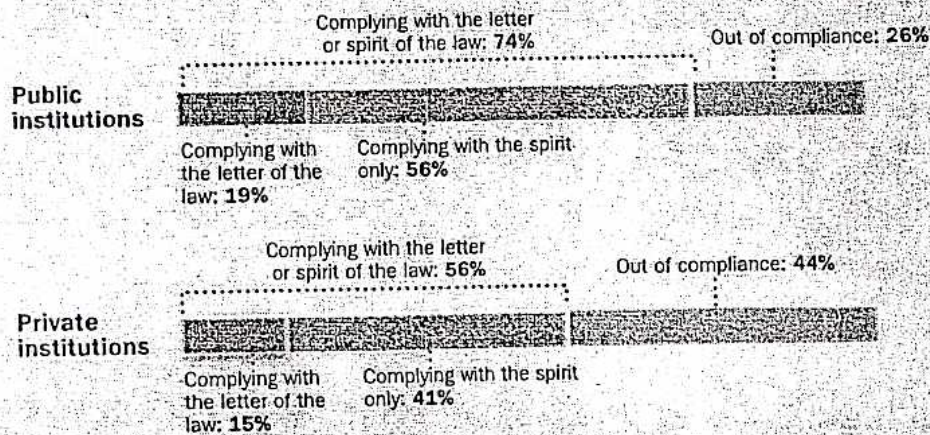
"It gets lost with a bunch of other things

they're trying to do on tight budgets," says Adam Weinberg, dean of the college at Colgate University. "It's an interesting reversal from where we started because most institutions of higher education were formed particularly with the goal of instilling in students a sense of civic engagement."

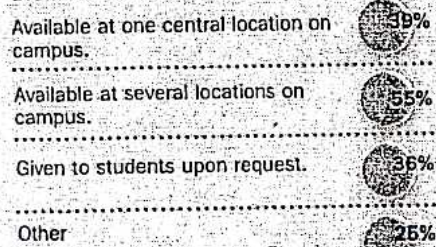
Additional information about the survey will be available at the Harvard Institute of Politics Web site (<http://www.iop.harvard.edu>) on Monday, September 13. ■

College Compliance With Voter-Registration Law

The *Chronicle* and the Harvard Institute of Politics collaborated on a survey to assess whether colleges were complying with a law that requires colleges to provide students with voter-registration materials. The results are based on replies from 249 colleges, or 30.6 percent of potential respondents.

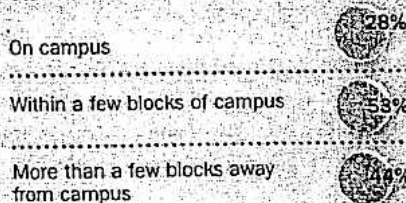


How does the institution make paper voter-registration forms available for students?

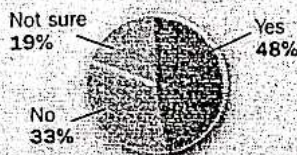


Note: Respondents could give multiple answers.

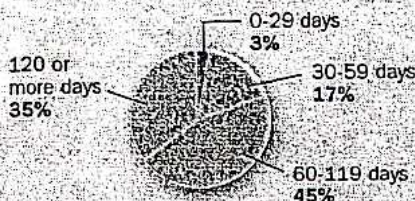
Where are polling places for your students?



Does your institution have a procedure in which state or local election officials are asked to send voter-registration forms before an election?



If the institution does have such a procedure, approximately how many days before an election is the request for voter-registration forms made?



Note: All figures are rounded.

SOURCE: THE INSTITUTE OF POLITICS AT HARVARD UNIVERSITY'S JOHN F. KENNEDY SCHOOL OF GOVERNMENT